

Karen Halttunen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. Yale University Press, 1983. xviii 262 pp. \$19.95.

In the last ten years or so, much of the most challenging and original work on 19th-century American literature and culture has been done by women. Or so it seems to a middle-aged male professor, raised (at least in graduate school) on the canon of American literature first selected by D.H. Lawrence and F.O. Matthiessen and then refined by the leading literary critics of the 1950s and '60s (also mostly male). Those male critics' "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," as Nina Baym has mischievously called their theories of American literature,<sup>1</sup> have begun to seem more and more limited and repetitious. In comparison, the work of Annette Kolodny, Kathryn Kish Sklar, Nancy Cott, and now Karen Halttunen is like a breath of fresh air . . . or like new voices in the room.

Their voices have been so different that it is impossible to categorize the work just as "feminist criticism," and yet it does focus, in different ways, on the limitations of the male version of American literary history and the need to re-discover the experience of women. Whether we will also get around, someday, to the re-evaluation of the fiction of the many very popular early American women writers (e.g., Susannah Rowson, Hannah Foster, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Lydia Maria Child, Harriet Beecher Stowe—"that damned mob of scribbling women," as Hawthorne called them) is another question. Paradoxically, it is one of the major male critics of the last generation, Henry Nash Smith, in *Democracy and the Novel*, who has recently moved towards doing that, and already a lot has been accomplished. So for the instruction of some of my more benighted brothers and the better appreciation of this new book, let me give a condensed chronology.

Kathryn Kish Sklar's *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (1973) begins the list (and also makes a good starting point for the uninstructed) because it identifies some of the most prominent issues in

<sup>1</sup>"Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," *American Quarterly*, vol. 33 (Summer, 1981), 123-139.

19th-century women's lives. Catharine, the eldest of Lyman Beecher's thirteen children, established her long, illustrious career on women's differences from men and on the transforming of her father's rigid Calvinism into a social gospel. As an advisor on everything from education to domestic architecture, she promoted a greater role for women because they were to guard the health and morality of American society. They would shape the American character by taking responsibility for raising and educating American children, thus guarding them in their early formative years against the dishonesty, aggressiveness, and selfishness of commerce and politics. To a modern feminist I am sure that Catharine Beecher is an ambivalent heritage, a tainted hero. In praising domesticity, she helped imprison women in parlor, kitchen, and church. But she also led in getting young single women work as school teachers, their first middle-class paid occupation. To do so, however, she urged not only their superior gentility but also their availability to financially pressed school districts at half the salary of men, since they did not have spouses or children to support. Even more complex is Catharine's relation to her father's Calvinism, since in some ways she helped to destroy its patriarchal privilege and severity while in other ways she kept it alive. She was so sharp in matters of theology that she could have been a minister herself, except for the barriers against women.

In 1975, in *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny took on the whole male tradition in the reading of American literature by analyzing one of its most important metaphors, the metaphor of land-as-woman. The availability of "virgin" wilderness that could be taken as a "bride" and made into or used as nurturing "mother," made pastoralism in America not just a dream but an expected reality. This led the American male to reject society and escape to nature, where possession, violation, frustration, and further exploitation followed, within the logic of the metaphor and the experience it shaped. Kolodny's book proved the irrationality, or artificiality and delusion of this American dream-turned-nightmare as the work of a male critic somehow could not have done. The male critics of pastoralism, the frontier myth, and the archetypes of innocence and experience in American literature seemed too identified in some fundamental way with the enigmas, ironies, and tragedies of the heroes. They also kept going over and over the work of the same ten or twelve male writers.

Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) went back

to the relationships between American women writers, the decline of Calvinism, and the rise of religious liberalism already opened by Sklar. Her thesis was that with these events also came changes in the American economy in which both preachers and women lost power. So they banded together to produce the sentimental culture of the pre-Civil War period that was marketed in advice books, popular novels, and ladies magazines—a culture that became so prominent that its second-class status, its submissiveness to men and business was sometimes masked. Stressing the superior virtue of domestic as opposed to commercial life, these writers glorified the woman's role but gave up intellectual rigor and real power. They championed sentimental values—feeling, benevolence, self-sacrifice and domesticity—and made “culture” in America genteel and effete.

Douglas' book got a lot of attention when it was first published, but its weaknesses become increasingly apparent. To view sentimentality as weak-minded, pious, and genteel and realism or romanticism as bold, rigorous, and unflinching is a classic male way of dividing the world. Douglas just carried on the attitudes of the male critics like Perry Miller and the anti-feminist novelists like Hemingway. She did not give the sentimentalists a really fair hearing.

Carroll Smith Rosenburg in “The Female World of Love and Ritual”<sup>2</sup> and Nancy Cott in *The Bonds of Womanhood* reached very different conclusions. Looking mainly at unpublished diaries and letters, they saw women gaining many advantages from the ideologies of sentimentality and domesticity. Women established very close ties with other women. Their roles in raising children and promoting domestic virtue were believed crucial to the success of democracy, and they used these roles in order to raise their status in other areas. “The Bonds of Womanhood,” a phrase Nancy Cott took from the letters of Sarah Grimké to Mary Parker, had two meanings: things that bound women down but also bound them together. Operating within (and from) a “woman's sphere,” women could assert influence and gain further rights. The “woman's sphere” was based upon ideas of women's difference rather than equality. Thus it excluded them from many occupations and activities. But it did give them a “social power based on their special female qualities,” and for many women this was an advance. “The ideology of woman's sphere formed a necessary stage in the process of shattering the hierarchy

<sup>2</sup>*Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1 (1975), 1-29.

of sex and, more directly, in softening the hierarchical relationship of marriage.”<sup>3</sup>

This new book, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, extends the study of Cott’s “woman’s sphere.” It examines the advice given to women, mainly in ladies magazines, about four of the areas of middle-class culture in which women were the major arbiters or consumers—fashions in dress, rules of etiquette, the rituals of mourning, and parlor theatricals. Moreover, it does this with an even good humor and astuteness, seeing the contradictions and ironies, but not acting morally superior. It is an informative and sometimes very absorbing book. It also has reproductions of Romantic and Sentimental fashions, funeral scenes, and parlor games and plays.

The broad context of all this advice and behavior was, Halttunen says, “sentimental culture.” It was the general style and taste dominating middle-class America from approximately 1830 to 1870, as, perhaps, “progressivism” or “modernism” might be said to have dominated American culture in the early and middle twentieth century. This is my comparison, not hers, which I make both as an illustration and to provide a degree of objectivity. “Sentimental” and “sentimentality” are still such offensive words to some people that it is difficult to treat this culture fairly. But Halttunen shows that we must, if we are to understand a great deal of the American past and the present that it shaped.

Nineteenth-century American sentimentality, as we have previously thought of it, was epitomized in Huckleberry Finn’s portrait of Emeline Grangerford, with her genteel language, her “Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec’d,” and her graveyard drawings (“‘I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas’”). It was, we think, foolish, humorless, and effeminate and also, like the Grangerfords, who talked of good-breeding while feuding and killing, fundamentally hypocritical. But Halttunen shows that true sentimentalists were as aware of their possible hypocrisy as any of their detractors—and constantly on guard against it. They were because one of their primary values was sincerity, a consistency between appearance and reality, word and deed, that seemed a necessary prerequisite to all other virtue. Sincerity had this importance because the sentimentalist, like his or her 18th-century ancestor, “the Man of Feeling,” believed in the natural benevolence of

<sup>3</sup>Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 200.

true, unaffected man or woman. If America was really to fulfill its destiny as a new chance for humankind, free of the injustices and inequalities of Europe, then this sincere, natural goodness was precisely what needed to be sheltered, developed in the young, and constantly expanded as a social force.

The conflicts came when the proponents of sincerity looked for ways to express it. Being sincere about one's feelings and inner character required, after all, certain social forms. Sentimental dress attempted to reveal the "transparent beauty" of the inner self, with good health and a good disposition serving as "moral cosmetics." Sentimental manners sought to avoid affectation and dissimulation, while also promoting "physical and emotional self-restraint." Sentimental practices in wearing mourning faced similar contradictions. If one were sincere and openly showed one's feelings, then the wearing of black should not be necessary. But a mourner still needed ways to announce his or her loss to strangers and the insensitive. Mourning sheltered the sensitive from crude, unfeeling outsiders.

People so concerned with fashions, etiquette, and mourning were also very concerned about gentility. Indeed, gentility seems to have rivaled sincerity, for it was the way in which Americans proved to one another their qualifications for middle-class status. Only the genteel could fully recognize cultivation and refinement; and only those who wished to be genteel would make the effort. For, says Halttunen, "Gentility in republican America was seen as the product not of fortunate birth but of middle-class effort" (p. 95). Thus a great deal of sentimental culture was a kind of play-acting in which the different actors performed for one another's approval, mutually acknowledging their success or failure. The rituals of mourning, for example, proclaimed the mourner's sensitivity, which intimate friends acknowledged by extending sympathy. "The capacity to experience deep grief demonstrated true gentility" (p. 144).

But nowhere was this acting more stylized, Halttunen shows, than in the rituals of the middle-class parlor, which was a kind of stage for the sentimental drama. As the front room in most houses, it was physically halfway between the cold anonymity of the street and the intimacy of the kitchen and family rooms. Kept neat for company, it was a display of the family's wealth, taste and breeding. Established hours and customs for "calling" set up the rules for entering, conversing, and leaving. A polite guest came promptly, did not pry into the

affairs and secrets in the other rooms, and tactfully turned away from any subject or incident of shame.

That the actors of sentimental culture recognized the dramatic nature of their game is proven, Halttunen argues, by the development in the late 1850s and 1860s of parlor theatricals. Following the play *Fashion* (1845), by Anna Cora Mowatt, which humorously criticized the pretensions of middle-class culture, people began “giving way to a worldly acceptance of self-display, social formalism, and ceremonial ritual as appropriate expressions of middle-class position” (p. 153). So the earlier “sentimental posture of moral earnestness” and puritanical objections to acting yielded to a more good-natured pleasure in formality. Masquerades, puppet shows, the acting of historical scenes, tableaux vivants, and other kinds of conscious theatricality called attention to and legitimized the subliminal theatricality of everyday life. Even the rituals of burial became theatrical, as the undertaker was replaced by the embalmer and the funeral director. The first made corpses suitable for viewing (genteel to the end!), and the other made funeral services more expensive and prolonged. With such changes the sentimental culture of the antebellum period passed on into the even greater ostentation of the Gilded Age.

The weakest part of this book is the argument that the genesis of sentimental culture was a fear of the “confidence men and painted women” referred to in the title. Halttunen represents the advice-writers as asking their readers to be sincere in order not to become confidence men or painted women, but also telling them not to be too open in order not to be vulnerable to deception. Sincerity was society’s defense of itself, as good character was the individual’s defense, when both seemed threatened by a fast-growing urbanization. However, she admits, the term confidence man “was probably first coined by the New York press in 1849 during coverage of the arrest of a swindler named William Thompson” (p. 6). That was nineteen years after the beginning of her study’s period. The confidence man may, as she says, accurately identify the villain of the age, but to name the whole book for him seems misguided.

Perhaps the title was chosen just for its catchiness. But a deeper explanation could be a continuing reluctance to confront American sentimentality in its full complexity. Halttunen’s analysis of it as a social drama brilliantly reveals its complexity. But the very word, to our over-intellectualized ears, connotes simplicity. We can’t yet believe it

could have so many faces and conflicts—even though the work of authors like Goldsmith, Sterne, Irving, and Dickens surely proves it did. We can't believe that something so seemingly ridiculous was once integrally bound up with serious issues like American attitudes towards nature, the development of a native culture, and cultivation of republican (as opposed to aristocratic) tastes. Halttunen shows that it was, even speaking at one point of Cooper's Leatherstocking as fulfilling "the sentimental idea of politeness. . . . His manners were easy and natural because they sprang from a right heart" (p. 101). WHAT! I said to that . . . Leatherstocking, the wish fulfillment of all us male critics, Leatherstocking as a sentimental ideal? Let's hear more. But Halttunen did not pursue the point, as she abandoned several other inquiries that might have given sentimentality higher academic and aesthetic status.

My puzzled conclusion is that Halttunen, like Ann Douglas, may have an abiding male bias against her subject. As a woman scholar, she just can't believe that sentimental culture has either the intellectual substance or the radical political content needed for a modern feminist criticism. Domesticity? Gentility? Parlor theatricals? Etiquette and fashion? It all looks sugar-sweet, superficial, and sick.

But a large part of the problem, I suspect, is that Halttunen's sources, like Ann Douglas', do not show sentimental culture in its most favorable light. Probably no period of American culture looks very noble or rigorous, radical or exciting when reconstructed from etiquette manuals, advice books, and magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book*. How would the 1920s and '30s look if you only read Emily Post, Dale Carnegie, and *The Saturday Evening Post*? A careful reading of such documents can give an idea of the issues that were on people's minds. It can give a sense of a period's vernacular. And Halttunen does this. But full appreciation of sentimentality as a whole culture will require a reading of those late 18th and early 19th-century novelists. Nor has much attention been given so far to autobiographies and letters, except as historical documents. When these are read thoughtfully, and when sentimental male writers like Cooper, Irving, and Hawthorne are re-appraised, we will, I think, have a very different view of American sentimentality and so of early republican literature and culture.